

"Pictures Fertile with Truth:" How Christians Managed to Make Images of God without Violating the Second Commandment

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In the introduction to his acclaimed *The Book of J* (New York, 1990), Harold Bloom reminds us of the extent to which a particular Christian position persists in the very terminology we use for Jewish scripture. Bloom writes,

> Christians call the Hebrew Bible the Old Testament, or Covenant, in order to supersede it with their New Testament . . . I myself suggest that Jewish critics and readers might speak of their Scriptures as the Original Testament, and the Christian work as the Belated Testament, for that, after all, is what it is, a revisionary work that attempts to replace a book, Torah, with a man, Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed Messiah of the House of David by Christian believers. (p. 3)

The notion that God's covenant with Israel had been replaced by a new and more perfect alliance is, of course, introduced in the New Testament itself. There, Christ's life not only completes the events and prophecies described in the Hebrew Bible—which it must if Jesus is to be recognized as the Messiah—it also replaces God's compacts with the Chosen People. The Epistle to Hebrews presents the case clearly.

> Had the first covenant been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second in its place. . . For the Law contains but a shadow and no true image of the good things which were to come. (8:7–10:1)

Accordingly, not only the explicit visions of future events that the Jews too took to be Messianic prophecies, but any passage in the Old Testament became a prefigurement if read attentively with the knowledge of Christ's life. For Christians, every person, event, and object in Hebrew scripture was a cryptic foretelling of Jesus and, hence, the whole Old Testament was a vast field to be searched for evidence of God's plan as they had come to understand it. The third-century theologian Origen offers a good example. Struck by the identity of the names Joshua and Jesus (both *Ihsoûs* in Greek), Origen wrote a 200-page treatise in which he demonstrated his belief that the Hebrew Book of Joshua had been written "much less to inform us of the deeds of Joshua, Son of Nave, than to describe the mysteries of Jesus, our Savior." (*Homilies on Joshua,* I, 3).

Verse 21 of Psalm 68 (69) suggests how the Christian reading proceeded. King David's scorching lament, "They gave me also gall for my food, and made me drink vinegar for my thirst," becomes nothing other than a reference to the sour wine mixed with gall offered to Christ on the cross. As the Evangelist John already recognized, "Jesus, aware that all had now come to its appointed end, said in fulfillment of Scripture, 'I thirst.' So they soaked a sponge with the sour wine, fixed it on a javelin, and held it up to his lips. Having received the wine, he said, 'It is accomplished.'" (John, 19:29) Many of the allegorical readings of the Hebrew Bible seem ludicrously undisciplined to us. During the Middle Ages, however, the very difficulty of finding Christian meaning in the Old Testament only contributed to the sense of the mystery of God's plan. To discern the true message in the words of scripture was a spiritual act; animating the sacred text was a way to approach God.

The burning bush described in the book of Exodus (3:2ff.), for instance, where Moses was instructed to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt, came to be understood as a sign of Christ's miraculous birth. How? The bush not consumed by flames was taken as a sign of Mary's virginity, unaltered by the divine conception. As a hymn sung in church on the Feast of Moses (September 4) recounts, "Moses knelt down when he saw the stupefying vision of the bush and of the fire, the extraordinary union that fig-

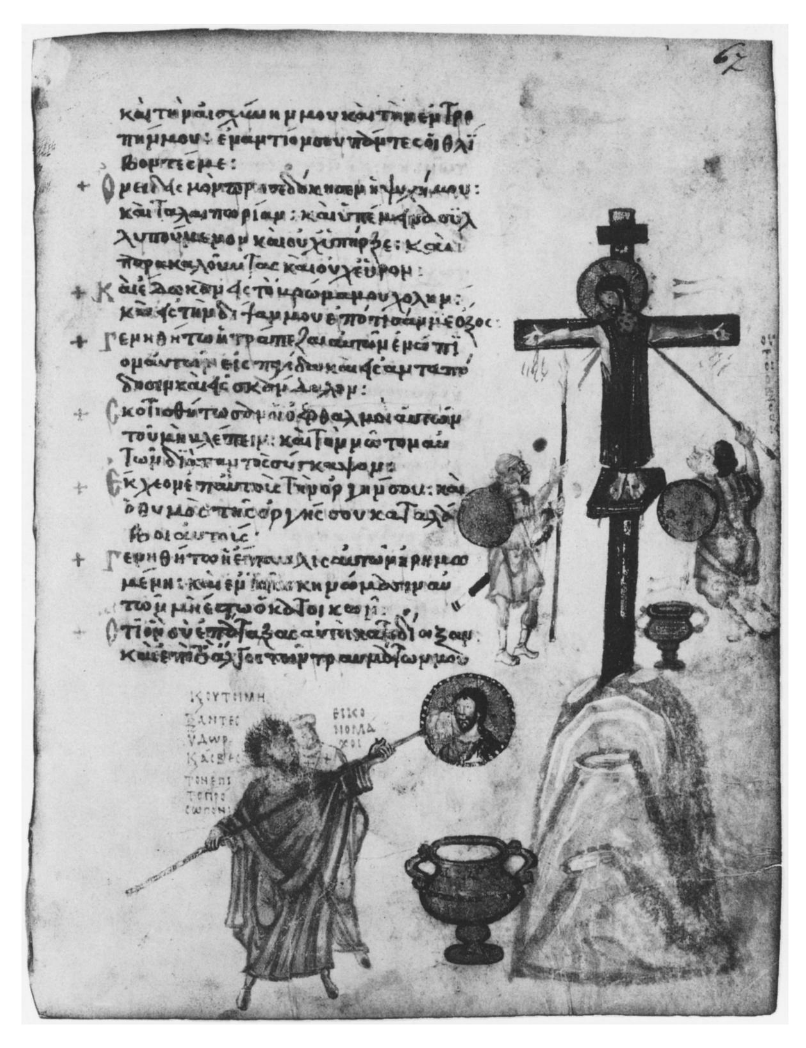


Fig. 1. Manuscript illumination, Psalm 68, Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. gr. 129, fol. 67.

ures ahead of time the untainted birth by the Virgin Mary." Read literally, Exodus tells only of Moses' mission to free the Israelites, of little interest to Gentiles. Read as prophecy—with Christ's life in mind—the ancient Jewish scripture discloses a Christian mystery with universal appeal.

From the very beginning, Christians embraced art as one means for providing spiritual readings of the Old Testament and, hence, for rendering scriptural exegesis accessible. Sometimes, this was done footnote-like, by appending a picture to the text itself. The ninth-century illuminator of a Byzantine psalter in Moscow (Historical Museum, cod. gr. 129, fol. 67; fig. 1), for instance, introduced the Crucifixion alongside Psalm 68, by means of this illustration converting the verses of a Jewish poem into a prophecy of Christ's Passion. Other times, the meaning of the Old Testament event was introduced with symbols, as when a thirteenth-century icon painter transformed the scene of Moses' theophany on Mt. Horeb into a prophecy of Christ's advent by inserting a portrait of Mary into the burning bush (Mt. Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine's; fig. 2). It was art's capacity to encompass more than one textual account in a coherent and plausible narrative, however, that gave pictures their special appeal in this process of Christian interpretation. Pictures could present the Jewish story intact and, at the same time, reveal its hidden significance—not only in association with texts or through symbolic interpolations—but in fully unified depictions that seemed both real and true. For example, as rendered by a ninth-century Byzantine illuminator, Ezekiel's vision of the "appearance of the glory of the Lord" enthroned in heaven (1:28) becomes a prophecy of Jesus Christ (Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, cod. gr. 699, fol. 74; fig. 3). To be sure, written commentaries also recognized Christ in the unspecific words of Hebrew scripture; in this case, the accompanying text notes that "[Ezekiel], like the others, under a figure foreshadows the great founder and ruler of our sec-

ond state, and foreshadows its constitution." (5, 172). Only by means of a picture, however, could the Christian understanding be assimilated fully and naturally to the several sacred texts.

The great fifth-century theologian Cyril of Alexandria offers insight into this process of transforming Old Testament words into Christian pictures. Trying to explain how Jewish scripture is "very much less than the truth and an incomplete indication of the things signified," Cyril turned to art.

> We say that the law was a shadow and a type like unto a picture set as a thing to be viewed before those watching reality. The underdrawing (shadow) and lines are the first elements in the pictures, and if the brightness of the colors is added to these, the beauty of the picture flashes forth. (*Epistle* 41, 21; trans. J. McEnery)

Cyril surreptitiously substituted "underdrawing" here (*skiagraphia* in Greek) for "shadow" (*skia*) in the text of Hebrews. The result is that Jewish scripture is likened to an artist's preliminary sketch, blocking in essentials (in the Ezekiel miniature, the Lord seated on a throne); Christ's covenant becomes the precise and brilliant painting laid on top. And just as a painting does not totally obscure its preparatory delineaments, Christianity does not destroy Hebrew scripture; rather, Christianity perfects the general forms of Jewish law by clarifying the significance in the extended theological economy. In contrast to Jews, who read the Bible as a closed and rigid written document, Christians understand it as art, to quote Cyril again, "as a picture fertile with truth." (*Epistle* 41, 23).

Cyril's use of artistic process to explain how Christians appropriate Hebrew scripture for their own purposes came to be deployed from the eighth century on as a real argument in support of images. His metaphoric interpretation was deemed especially forceful during this period against a growing cohort of critics who increasingly attacked images, and by 730, instituted real iconoclasm in Byzantine lands, that is, the systematic destruction of all religious art. Cyril's argument offered ammunition against one of the iconoclasts' charges, namely that images are not authorized anywhere in scripture; his likening of the New Testament to a completed painting was based on the Epistle to Hebrews, after all. Cyril's commentary was read at the Second Council of Nicaea assembled in 787 (J. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum*, vol. 13, p. 12), the first time a church body met with the express purpose of defining formally the place of icons in Christian worship. Even earlier, John of Damascus had reduced it to an aphorism in his important treatise, *On the Divine Images*: "As the Law is a preliminary ad-



Fig. 2. Icon, *Moses Before the Burning Bush*, Mt. Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery [Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mt. Sinai].

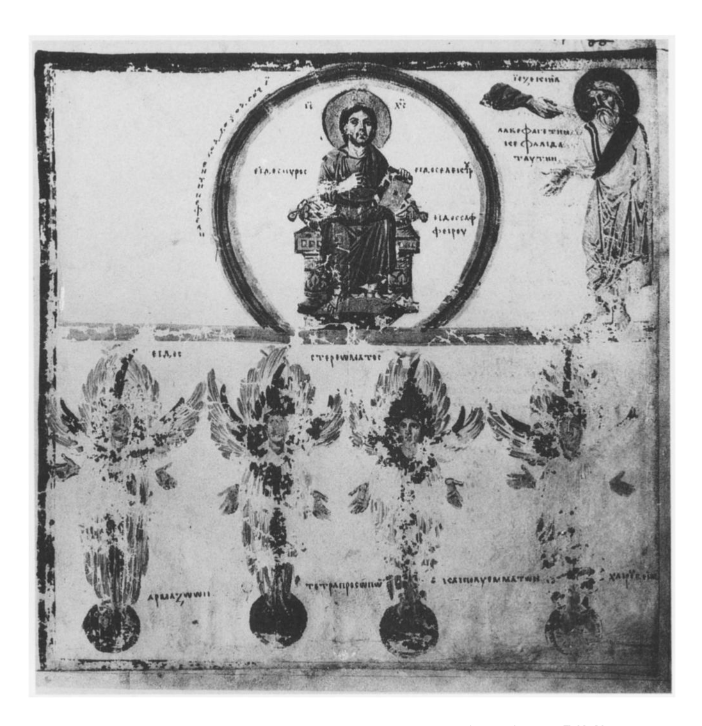


Fig. 3. Manuscript illumination, *Vision of Ezekiel*, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, cod. gr. 699, fol. 74.



Fig. 4. Manuscript illumination, *Moses Receiving the Laws*, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, cod. Plut. 6, 32, fol. 7v.

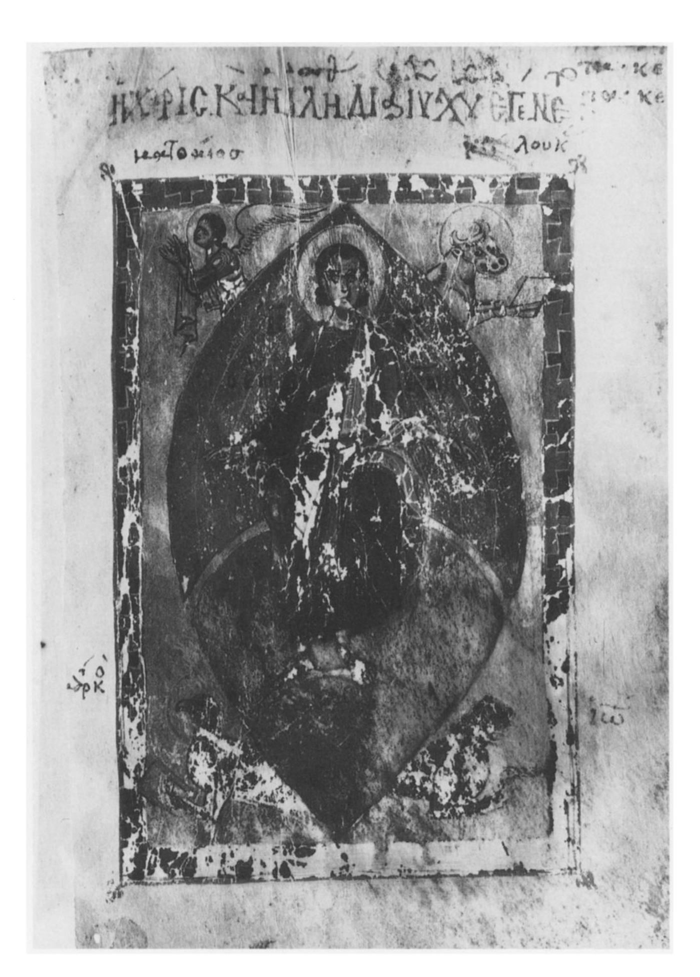


Fig. 5. Manuscript illumination, *Christ in Majesty*, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, cod. Plut. 6, 32, fol. 8.

umbration of the colored picture, so Grace and Truth are the colored picture" (paraphrasing John Chrysostom, *PG* 94, 1363). And in this version, a second scripture added to the mix enhanced the metaphor's authority, John 1:17: "The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The trope was refashioned further and recycled in numerous later writings on images, completely fusing the Old Testament with an artist's preparatory sketch and the Gospels with the completed picture. In the life of the Patriarch Tarasios written by Ignatius the Deacon in the ninth century, for instance, pictures are defended precisely as a means for explicating the Old Testament and for presenting the New.

> Who would not venerate a colored depiction illustrating examples of piety, through which one can be taught the ancient lessons about the world, the Law, and the prophets, completing the understanding of the old covenant and archaic thought? Through [pictures] one comes to learn perfectly the divine and great wonders, which leads beholders to the glory of God. (*PG*, 98, 1415 and I.A. Heikel, p. 416)

Cyril's metaphor came to the mind of the great ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, Photios, when he read Christ's claim in the Gospel of Matthew, "I came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it" (5:17):

> Here is designated the preliminary sketch of the image filled by colors, certainly the perfection of the drawing and not its abrogation. Christ coming to the human commonwealth served the first underdrawing in the law and completed it. (*Frag. in Matt.* 5:17; *PG* 101, 1193)

Nicephorus, like Tarasios and Photios a patriarch of Constantinople, put it bluntly, calling those who would dare destroy images "persecutors of color, or rather, persecutors of Christ" (*Adversos Iconomachos*, chap. 20; J.B. Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense*, p. 282). This point is made visual in the Moscow Psalter (fig. 1). Iconoclasts "crucify" an icon just as the soldier pushing a vinegar-soaked sponge to his lips tortures Christ himself, not by breaking or defacing the image but by covering its color with whitewash.

What in the Epistle to Hebrews is simply a metaphor for describing the levels of God's revelation

—shadow/image/celestial reality—was transformed by means of Cyril's elaboration into a powerful defense of pictures. It could now be said that images were indeed grounded in the Bible, in the Gospels as well as Epistles. And like the Gospels, pictures were constructed as theological meditations of the Old Testament. Just as Christ had fulfilled and perfected the Jewish prophecies, so too images of him completed the bare words of the old law and resolved the enigmas they contained. Because of their fullness and presence, pictures belong to a later, better, Christian phase of sacred history in which truth is known directly.

From the tenth century, this opposition of written revelation and Christian image was introduced in certain Gospel books that, anomalously, included frontispieces of Moses Receiving the Commandments and juxtaposed them with pictures of Christ in Majesty. The late twelfth-/early thirteenth-century codex in Florence (Laurenziana, cod. Plut. 6, 32, fols. 7v-8; figs. 4 and 5) is typical. On the left, Moses is shown striding forward through the valley of Sinai and receiving the tablets from a hand emerging from a celestial arc, a symbol of the invisible God known only through words. On the right, Christ is portrayed, God made man and the source of the four Gospels. The caption quotes John 1:17 to clarify the meaning: "The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Here, exactly, is Harold Bloom's contrast of Torah and man. Here also is the evolved opposition of Jewish revelation locked in history and law, as against the continuously accessible Christian covenant available in effigies of Christ. Germanos, an eighth-century patriarch of Constantinople, explained it this way.

> The Gospel is the coming of God, when He was seen by us; He is no longer speaking to us as through a cloud and indistinctly, as He did to Moses through thunder and lightning and trumpets, by a voice, by darkness and fire on the mountain. But he appeared visibly as a true man and we have beheld his glory as the only begotten Son, full of grace and truth. Through Him, the God and the Father spoke to us face to face, and not through riddles. (*On the Divine Liturgy*; trans. P. Meyendorff)

Attempting to incorporate this remarkable argument into canon law, a church council in 692 had long before demanded that all symbols be replaced by full depictions:

> On some venerable images a lamb is depicted, a symbol of Grace showing us in advance, through the Law, the true Lamb, Christ our Lord. While embracing the ancient symbols and shadows inasmuch as they are signs and anticipatory tracings handed down to the Church, we give preference to Grace and Truth which we have received as the fulfillment of the Law. Consequently, in order that the perfect should be set down before everyone's eyes even in painting, we decree that Christ our Lord should henceforward be set up in human form on images in place of the ancient lamb. (Mansi, *Sac. conc.*, 11, 977; trans. C. Mango)

According to this edict, art was no longer simply to stand in for scriptural exegesis, it had actually to present the interpretation. The Epistle to Hebrews underlies the language of this seventh-century canon, and its rephrasings, in the contrasts here of Old Testament shadows and tracings to the perfected images of Christ.

Some seven hundred years later, the argument was elaborated in a depiction of Moses before the Burning Bush in a manuscript unfortunately destroyed in the great Smyrna fire of 1922 and known today only in photographs (Evangelical School, cod. B 8, p. 166; fig. 6). Representing the words of Exodus 3:6, "Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to gaze on God," the miniature depicted the prophet shielding his eyes as he listened to the divine voice symbolized by the hand. As on the thirteenth-century icon (fig. 2), the viewer of the miniature is shown the mystery of Moses' theophany in the figures of the Virgin and Child, something that the prophet himself could not see. Here, however, the Christian vision is introduced not simply through an inserted motif but by an icon. Mary and Christ portrayed above the Old Testament narrative not only convey the message that the burning bush symbolized God's plan to deliver his Chosen People through a son born of a virgin; presented in a framed portrait, they also assert that this message is to be found in images. A hymn attributed to Theodore of Stoudios sung on the feast commemorating the cult of images—which not just incidentally is celebrated on the day of the Feast of Moses and Aaron—proclaims the same revelation.

> Moses was deemed worthy to contemplate you, Mother of God, mystically manifested in the burning bush; we have been introduced to you more clearly, seeing the image of your form; judged worthy to adore it, we receive directly the grace emanating from your protection which resides in it. (J. Johannet, *Nicée* II, p. 149)

Like Christ in Majesty in the Florence Gospels, the icon of the Virgin and Child reminds the faithful that, whereas in the past, God made himself available only through enigmatic words uttered to a few chosen prophets, a living God is now always accessible everywhere through images.

Sinai, it should be remembered, is where God bestowed writing on mankind, inscribing the tablets de-



Fig. 6. Manuscript illumination, *Moses on Horeb*, formerly Smyrna, Library of the Evangelical School, cod. B 8, p. 166 [after Strzygowski].

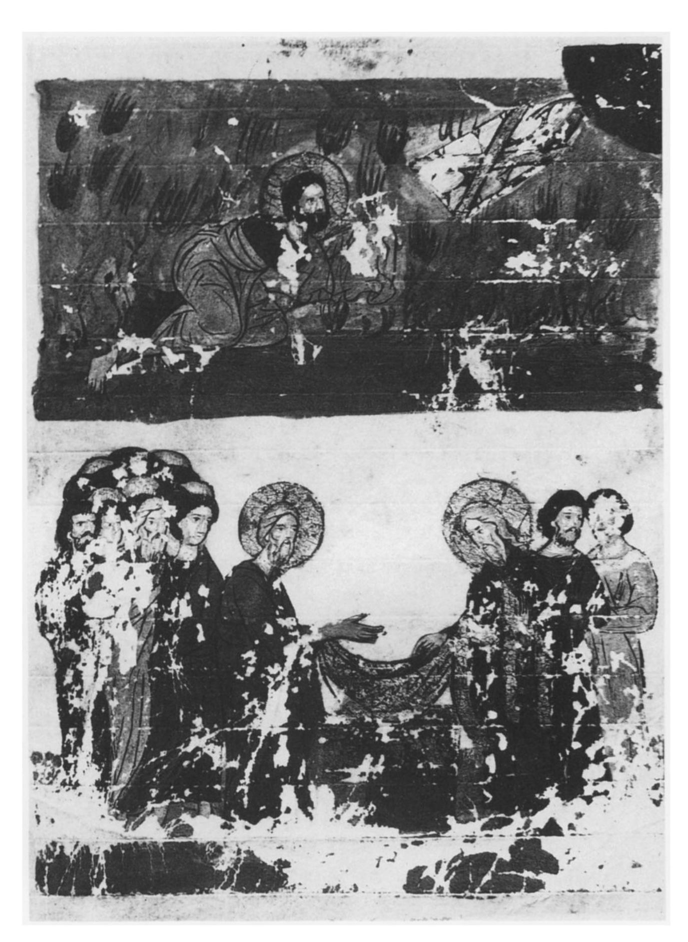


Fig. 7. Manuscript illumination, *Moses Receiving the Laws* and *Moses and Aaron Depositing Tablets in the Ark of the Covenant*, formerly Smyrna, Library of the Evangelical School, cod. B 8, p. 167 [Vienna, Nationalbibliothek].

livered to Moses with his own finger and dictating the Torah for the prophet to transcribe. The miniature suggests that it was also on Sinai that God inaugurated images, or at least that is the possibility raised by the miniature's caption: "Mt. Sinai, the true beholding" (*alethes theoria*). The reference is purposefully ambiguous. In Greek usage, "*theoria*" means both the actual contemplation of perceptible things and also a deep intellectual activity that goes beyond sensible perception to penetrate the meaning of events. As physical seeing, "*theoria*" here alludes to Moses' encounter with God and to viewing the icon, to the momentous theophany that culminated in the Exodus of the Israelites and the giving of laws, but also to the continuing theophany available to Christians in images. As interpretation, it refers to the process demonstrated in the miniature, the revelation that Mary and Christ are the true theophany veiled in this Old Testament story.

Once again, Cyril of Alexandria comes to mind. In trying to explain how the Book of Joshua can be read both as an account of Joshua's conquests and as a prefigurement of Christ's life, Cyril recalled a legend about Moses' death (*Stromata* VI, 15, 132, 3; *PG* 9, 356f.). Caleb, an Israelite, saw only a natural occurrence: Moses carried into a cave and buried; but Joshua, that is Jesus, perceived a supernatural event: angels descending to take the prophet's soul to heaven. Jews comprehend with carnal senses, they see only the historical occurrence; Christians read the same words and witness the same events, but they understand the true significance.

The icon in this miniature is a *theoria* in both senses of the word. It clarifies the mystery of the bush not consumed by fire and offers a material contemplation of God's revelation. In contrast to the Jews who failed to excavate truth from the law—even Moses who was allowed to talk to God on the holy mountain and to glimpse his back—Christians are granted the privilege of seeing God, because Christ resolved the enigmas of the biblical prophecies and by entering matter, God became visible.

The pictorial argument is expanded further on

the facing page, which confronts the icon and episode of the burning bush with two more scenes from the story of Moses (p. 167; fig. 7). At the top, Moses receives the tablets from God's hand (as was common in Byzantine art, these are shown as rectangular slabs of veined marble, but here unusually large and strapped together). Below, with Aaron and the Israelites, he deposits the enshrouded commandments in the ark of the covenant, rendered as a tomb-like chest. The tablets of law sealed from view and evoking a sense of death, contrast with the painted tablet of the life-giving mother and child open to all. God's truth formerly cloaked in the Old Testament's dark mysteries—in sounds and words, in symbols and obscure tracings—is made visible now through Christ, who fulfilled the prophecies and enabled full, colored images to disengage the true sense of the words in Hebrew scripture.

But what of the explicit prohibition of images in the laws that Moses received from God on Sinai? How could Christians get around the Second Commandment's unqualified injunction of all pictorial representation?

> On the day when the Lord spoke to you out of the fire on Horeb, you saw no figure of any kind; so take good care not to fall into the degrading practice of making figures carved in relief of a man or a woman, or of any animal on earth or bird that flies in the air, or of any reptile on the ground or fish in the waters under the earth . . . gods made by human hands out of wood and stone, gods that can neither see nor hear, neither eat nor smell. (Deut. 4:15-28)

As Theodore of Stoudios suggested in his influential treatise, *On the Holy Icons*, the Second Commandment could be either dismissed as irrelevant to Christians or could be subjected to a spiritual reading.

> Whatever the Law says, it says to those under the Law. The ancient commandments should not be imposed on those under grace . . . But we must understand these things only as a foreshadowing. The apostle says that the Law is a shadow but not the true image of the realities. (II, 36; trans. C. Roth)

Unlike the stories they took as prophecy and in contrast to the 613 Levitical regulations they rejected as parochial, however, Christians maintained the Decalogue, believing that the Ten Commandments coincided with natural law. Just as the condemnation of stealing and adultery and the requirements to honor God and one's parents were regarded as inherent rules governing social behavior, so too the prohibition of images. Made by men of dead matter, images could never merit the veneration due God alone, the creator of man. Those who opposed the cult of images always invoked the Second Commandment; the Jewish prohibition is the starting point of every iconoclastic polemic.

Defenders of images had, then, to respond directly to this attack, and they did so in various ways. Some asserted that because Jews had lived in Egypt, a land of idols, they were predisposed to idolatry and had to be curbed in ways no longer necessary for Christians. Others pointed out that the injunction could not have been meant absolutely, since Jews themselves also revered holy objects, the tabernacle and holy vessels kept inside it, indeed, the tablets of the law themselves. These, too, were entered into the debate as "material contemplations" on a par with holy scripture itself. Thus, John of Damascus could argue,

> An image foreshadows something that is yet to happen, something hidden in riddles and shadows. For instance, the ark of the covenant is an image of the Holy Virgin and Theotokos, as are the rod of Aaron and jar of manna. . . Again, things which have taken place are remembered by means of . . . two kinds of images: either they are words written in books, as when God had the law engraved on tablets and desired the lives of holy men to be recorded, or else they are material images, such as the jar of manna, or Aaron's staff, which were to be kept in the ark as a memorial. (*On the Divine Images*, I, 12–13; trans. D. Anderson)

The same argument, indeed paraphrased from John of Damascus, was forcefully advanced in a little-known treatise on icons written by the philosopher John Italos at the end of the eleventh century, which concludes with the claim that icons are answers to the "riddles" found in Hebrew scripture and replacements for the sacred vessels formerly kept in the tabernacle.

> Images represent the future through painted symbols, as the Red Sea according to the Apostle, which represents the water of baptism and the cloud the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 10:2). The contemplation (*theoria*) by means of the past assists future generations through remembrance. These images are of two kinds: either they are written words, as when God himself engraved the law on tablets of stone and old holy books he commanded to be written, or they are material contemplations (*theorias*), as when God arranged everything together, the manna jar and rod kept in the ark as a memorial. According to the custom of excellent men, we make and set up holy and venerable icons. (P.-P. Joannou, *Ioannes Italos quaestiones quodlibetales*, p. 151)

And the same claim is made visual in the Smyrna manuscript through a series of miniatures juxtaposing diverse icons of Mary and Christ with their material



Fig. 8. Manuscript illumination, "*The Jar of Manna*," formerly Smyrna, Library of the Evangelical School, cod. B 8, p. 178 [Paris, École pratique des Hautes Études, Collection Millet].

prefigurements: the tabernacle, table, menorah, Aaron's budding rod, jar of manna, and tablets of the law. One miniature, for example, depicts Moses and Aaron flanking the jar of manna (p. 178; fig. 8)—a classic prefigurement of the Virgin whose womb contained Christ—and its *theoria* in the form of an enormous icon of the Virgin and Child suspended above. Another represents the tabernacle's interior with the tablets, jar of manna, and budding rod below and a circular icon of Mary and Christ above (p. 179; fig. 9); quite literally, here, the Christian image fulfills Jewish revelation in material forms far superior to those Moses made after he descended from the holy mountain, superior even to the tablets of the law inscribed by God himself. Moreover, as the caption recalls, the Jewish vessels were kept hidden; only the high priest could approach them and then but once a year when he sought the people's redemption inside the tabernacle. Christian icons, in contrast, were always open to everyone, because God had become visible in Christ and had provided an eternal sacrifice through the Crucifixion.

It was the christological argument that proved most effective in disposing the Second Commandment:



Fig. 9. Manuscript illumination, "*The Tabernacle*," formerly Smyrna, Library of the Evangelical School, cod. B 8, p. 179 [Paris, École pratique des Hautes Études, Collection Millet].

God, invisible to the Jews, could be represented because he had assumed flesh and was seen. To deny images was tantamount to questioning the reality of Christ's incarnation, or so the defenders of images maintained. The liturgy performed on the feast of images asserts,

> Those who penetrate the words of Moses, "Watch yourselves, because the day the Lord spoke to you on the mountain at Horeb, you heard the sound of words but you did not see his form," they know how to respond. . . Thus, those who have received from God the power to distinguish the prohibition contained in the law and the instruction borne by Grace, the one which, in the law is invisible, the other which, in Grace, is visible and palpable and, for this reason, they represent in images the realities seen and touched and venerated. (*Synodikon of Orthodoxy*; Gouillard, p. 51)

Another refutation of the Second Commandment —implied by Italos, for instance—was the claim that pictures are the spiritual significance beneath the law. Whoever attacks images because of the old prohibi-



Fig. 10. Manuscript illumination, "*The Spiritual Tablets,*" Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, cod. Ross. gr. 251, fol. 12v.

tion reads the Bible literally, the way Jews do, missing its higher truth. As John of Damascus put it,

> They truly are in error, brothers, for they do not know the Scriptures, that the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. They do not find in the written word its hidden, spiritual meaning. (*On the Divine Images,* I, 5; trans. C. Roth)

The reference here—now tethered to the defense of images—is to the most potent argument against the old covenant found anywhere in the New Testament, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Developing the account in the book of Exodus which describes Moses' transfigured face when he read the law to Israel, the apostle advanced the essentially spiritual nature of Christianity.

> [Christ's covenant is a] new covenant, a covenant expressed not in a written document, but in a spiritual bond; for the written law condemns to death, but the Spirit gives life. The law, then, engraved letter by letter upon stone, dispensed death, and yet it was inaugurated with divine splendor . . . which made the face of Moses so bright that the Israelites could not gaze steadily on him . . . [Moses] put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing on the fading splendor until it was gone. But in any case their minds had been made insensitive, for that same veil is there to this very day when the lesson is read from the old covenant; and it is never lifted, because only in Christ is the old covenant abrogated. But to this very day, every time the Law of Moses is read, a veil lies over the minds of the hearers. However, as Scripture says of Moses, "whenever he turns to the Lord the veil is removed." Now the Lord of whom this passage speaks is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. And because for us, there is no veil over the face, we all reflect as in a mirror the splendor of the Lord. (3:6-18)

Put more succinctly by Cyril of Alexandria, "Because we are led in Christ toward the sight of God and the Father, we will see glory without the veil of Moses, understanding the laws spiritually" (*Glaphyrorum in Exodum,* III; *PG* 69, col. 537). For Christians, then, the law instituted through Moses to mediate between man



Fig. 11. Manuscript illumination, "*The Spiritual Tablets*," Mt. Sinai, St. Catherine's Monastery, cod. gr. 417, fol. 4 [Kurt Weitzmann].

and God has lost its grasp, and Jews, adhering to it blindly, are doomed to death. Christ is now offered in place of the law, and with him grace and freedom of the spirit. By understanding the Old Testament through Christ's life, Christians lift the veil from Moses' face, revealing the spirit of God's law and seeing God's glory face to face.

The implications of Paul's argument and the others we have been examining are fully realized in an eleventh-century miniature decorating a copy of John Climacus's *Heavenly Ladder* in the Vatican Library (cod. Ross. 251, fol. 12v; fig. 10). Its oxymoronic caption, ΠΛΑΚΕC ΠΝ(EUMAT)IKAI, "spiritual tablets," picks up the contrast Paul set up between the law—written letter by letter on stone—and the life-giving spirit of the new covenant. In the immediate context, this refers to Climacus's own treatise written in the seventh century at St. Catherine's on Mt. Sinai and called "Spiritual Tablets," both to link it to Moses' law transmitted in the same place and, at the same time, to distinguish its own Christian message. Thus, a letter from John of Raithu to Climacus, included in the Vatican manuscript as in other exemplars of the treatise, likens the author to "Moses of old on that same mountain [who has] seen in the vision of God and [has sent] us a book like the divinely written tablets, for the instruction of the New Israel." (*PG* 88, col. 624; trans. L. Moore). Whereas in such earlier manuscripts of the *Heavenly Ladder* as the tenth-century Climacus on Mt. Sinai (Monastery of St. Catherine's, cod. 417, fol. 4; fig. 11) the "Spiritual Tablets" are shown simply as marble plaques, the Byzantine convention for representing Moses' laws (cf. figs. 4, 7, and 9), in the Vatican miniature, two icons of Christ replace the liths, thus demonstrating the claim that holy images have superseded the Old Testament. In fact, the empty plaques remain visible as squares beneath the twin portraits; quite literally, here, the law is the shadow, a preparatory outline, and Christ really the painted image. As Cyril had explained it, by understanding the laws spiritually, the faithful are led toward the sight of God through Christ.

The icons pictured in the Vatican miniature are specifically the originary Byzantine portraits of Christ and hence the holiest of all images. The one at the left is the Mandylion, a fringed white cloth decorated with a diaper design and bearing Christ's face encircled by a halo. According to legend, it was created without artistic intervention when a cloth was pressed to Christ's face. The Mandylion is less a work of art, then, than a relic witnessing God's presence on earth and, hence, was taken by defenders of images as proof that the prohibition of graven images did not pertain to those who had actually seen God on earth. The Patriarch Nicephorus, for instance, cited the Mandylion against those who demanded scriptural proof that the Mosaic injunction had indeed been abrogated; Christ's act of transferring the imprint of his face onto the cloth, he maintained, was more persuasive than writing (*Antirrheticus* III, 42; *PG*, 100, 461). The icon at the right is the Keramion, a terra-cotta tile ornamented with the same lozenge and vegetal pattern as the Mandylion only in white, and the same portrait only in mirror reversal. The Keramion, too, was produced miraculously when a tile was laid atop the Mandylion to protect it; a mechanical offset of the first, it asserts the possibility of reproducing holy images.

Because the two icons were not actually manufactured, they confound one of the principles underlying the Mosaic prohibition of images, "the degrading practice of making figures carved in relief and the worshipping of gods made by human hands." And shown together, the Mandylion and Keramion also refute a second tenet of the biblical proscription, namely, that because they are themselves made of inani-

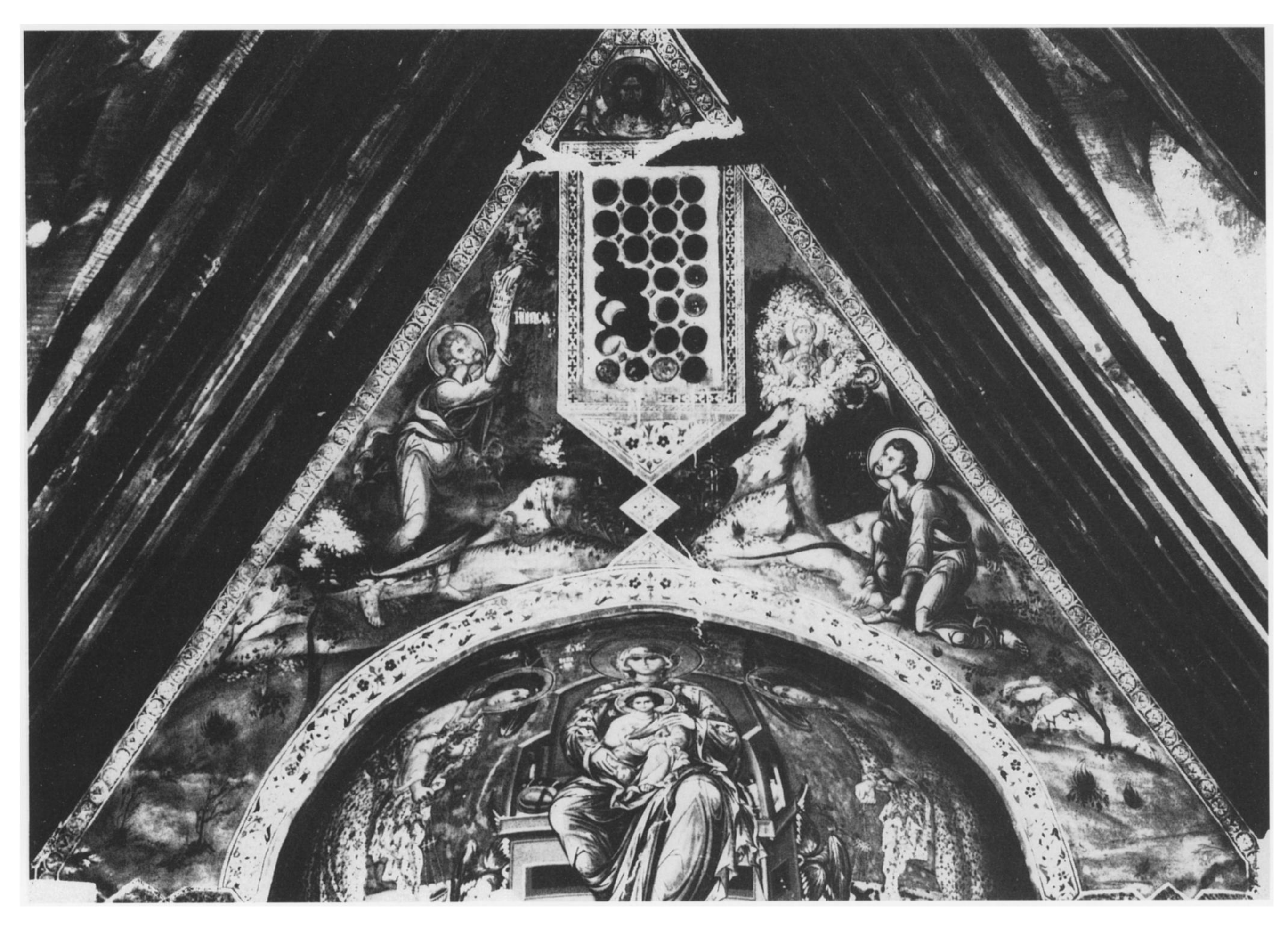


Fig. 12. Fresco, *Moses Before the Burning Bush*, *Moses Receiving the Laws*, and the *Holy Mandylion*, Cyprus, Panhaghia Podithou [after Papageorghiou].

mate matter, images are dead "gods that can neither see nor hear, neither eat nor smell." The reversals of tone and color produce the effect of matrix and print in the paired images, recalling modern photographic processes; and within the limits of symmetry, such minor modifications as the turn of the eyes and fall of hair reinforce the suggestion of an offset also in the faces. But the portraits of Christ are themselves virtually identical to one another, completely resistant to the reversals of color established so carefully in the material supports. In other words, the paired icons make the claim that the holy visage exists independent of cloth and clay, outside the matter through which it is realized.

Theodore of Stoudios explained how this worked by likening the icon to an intaglio seal that can impress an identical image into such diverse materials as clay or wax.

> A seal is one thing, and its imprint is another. Nevertheless, even before the impression is made, the imprint is in the seal. There could not be an effective seal which is not impressed on some material. Therefore, Christ also, unless he appears in an artificial image, is in this respect idle and ineffective. . . If he who looks at the seal and its imprint sees a similar and unchanged form in both, the imprint exists even before the impression is made. (*On the Holy Icons*, III, D, 9-10; trans. C. Roth)

To be seen by human eyes, the image must be realized in matter; but it exists independent of that impression and of the specific material chosen. By referring to them as *plakes*, tablets, the miniature's caption emphasizes the icons' materiality; but this only serves to underscore the notion that they are *plakes pneumatikai*, "spiritual tablets." It is the portrait that gives the icons their spirit, the holy face expressed through—not in—the matter. The mysterious amalgam of dead matter and immaterial image is precisely what sanctifies the icon, just as the Christian reading of Jewish scripture animates the old covenant. Once again, Christians do not simply reject Jewish custom; they appropriate it for their own purposes.

The connection of icon to the Mosaic tablets was remembered in 944 when the Byzantine emperor rescued the authentic Mandylion from the Muslims and brought it into his chapel in Constantinople. Senate



Fig. 13. Mosaic, *Mary and Christ*, Istanbul, Hagia Sophia [Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks].

and priests acclaimed the chest in which the holy portrait was carried into the city as a second Ark of the Covenant, superior to "the other less elevated ark containing the most holy, venerable, and mysterious covenant" (*PG*, 113, 420). Tacked to a board and set in a gold frame, the Mandylion was then displayed in the Pharos Chapel where the actual tablets were kept as relics. The association between Jewish law and Christian image continued to be recalled in church services. Readings on a feast established to celebrate the Mandylion include Moses' admonition not to forget the law, and a recapitulation of the Ten Commandments. And the recollection of the covenant with Moses, not its suppression, persisted in art as well. Sixteenth-century frescoes on the apse wall of the church of Panhaghia Podithou on Cyprus (fig. 12) give pride of place to Moses Receiving the Laws and Moses before the Burning Bush where, as usual, the prefigurement of Mary and Christ appear. At the apex above the window, the Holy Mandylion is pictured to assert a fundamental point: with the coming of Christ, the old law, including the prohibition of images, had been at one time both fulfilled and superseded. The stone tablets "engraved letter by letter" yield to an image that reveals rather than veils the "splendor of the Lord."

Christians could have images without violating the Second Commandment, then, because pictures are a *theoria* of the biblical injunction, a spiritual contemplation, both of the words themselves and of the material tablets on which they were inscribed. Precisely by seeming to violate one of God's most emphatic prohibitions, images assert the belief that the old covenant no longer pertains and that adherence to the law is heresy or, at the very least, Jewish blindness. Like the Christian Bible having a New Testament and an Old, pictures reminded the Christian faithful that the laws delivered to Moses during his ascent on Sinai were imperfect, containing only what was shown and understood before the Incarnation. Indeed, they draw power from the tension between the two scriptures and from the process used to harmonize the dual revelation. If Torah contains God in every letter, every word, every line, revealing divine will only through permanent interpretation, images present the unity of the divine economy in Christ—immediately and all at once. Just as Christians called Hebrew law the "Old Testament" in order to supersede it with their new scripture, so too they asserted the superiority of their covenant every time they made an icon. For like Christ's Gospels—to which it was frequently equated—the holy image was a mysterious fusion of the actual and the spiritual.

The icon, then, does not merely symbolize Christian supersession, though the themes and liturgical literature surrounding it insistently advance that idea, too. It re-enacts the central Christian mystery. Christ brought mankind a life-giving spirit that abrogated the law; the holy image does the same. And just as in Jesus Christ a true man is united with God, in the icon, matter acquires Grace when it is impressed with the sacred form.

As complicated as were these theological claims, set down in voluminous treatises, images succeeded not because of the theological logic but because of a mystery inherent in art itself. Pictures triumphed in Christian culture because of the magical facility of all art to transform stone and wood and pigments and glass and metal into living things. What had provoked

the Second Commandment in the first place, the danger that material objects animated through art would be mistaken for living creatures, was what led ultimately to the injunction's annulment. For when Christian viewers saw pigments composed of base matter converted into beautiful faces, or marble tesserae mysteriously transformed into radiant cheeks, they discovered further evidence of the wondrous wedding of flesh and spirit in their Incarnate God. Photios understood this well and he will once again be our witness. Writing of the mosaic set up in Hagia Sophia shortly after the end of Iconoclasm (fig. 13)—an icon of the Virgin and Child, incidentally, quite like that in the Smyrna Cosmas (fig. 8)—the great patriarch embedded the most profound theology in the very process through which art imbues matter with life.

> Before our eyes is the Virgin carrying the Creator in her arms as an infant, depicted in painting as she is in writings and visions, a grace of the eyes and a grace of the mind, carried by which the divine love in us is uplifted to the intelligible beauty of truth. You might think her not incapable of speaking even if one were to ask her, "How didst thou give birth and remainest a virgin?" To such an extent have the lips been made flesh by the colors, that they appear merely to be pressed together and stilled as in the mysteries, yet their silence is not at all inert neither is the fairness of her form derivatory, but rather is it the real archetype. (Homily XVII, 2; trans. C. Mango)

"You might think her not incapable of speaking . . ." *Hear,* in Photios' words, the echo of the Second Commandment's prohibition against "gods made by human hands that can neither see nor hear neither eat nor smell."

"To such an extent have the lips been made flesh by colors." *See* in the image itself, in the life-bestowing power all art possesses, how the commandment is subsumed in the mystery of the Incarnation.

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